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SUBJECT: CODEL MCCAIN MEETING WITH IRAQI PRESIDENT TALABANI

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher Hill for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Talabani predicted to CODEL McCain that, with U.S. help, the Kurds and Arabs would be able to avoid conflict and resolve critical issues like the status of Kirkuk. He said Barhem Salih was on track to become the next KRG prime minister. FM Zebari emphasized that the January 2010 elections would be a "make or break" event for Iraq's future and urged U.S. activism to encourage the formation of issues-based coalitions. Turning to Iraq's neighbors, Talabani said Iran was facing a "serious crisis" but continued to meddle in Iraqi affairs. Talabani was upbeat on relations with Egypt, but confirmed Saudi Arabia's refusal to seriously engage with PM Maliki. Both Talabani and Zebari chastised Syria for supporting Iraqi Ba'athists and "hosting" suicide bombers and were skeptical about Assad's intentions in engaging the United States. While regretting the recent loss of life at Ashraf, Talabani noted the Mujaheddin-e Khalq (MEK) organization refused to cooperate with the GOI and remarked that the MEK were "hated" by Iraqis for having served as part of Saddam's security forces. Sen. McCain stressed the need for the orderly transfer of detainees. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Senators John McCain, Joe Lieberman, Susan Collins, and Lindsey Graham (CODEL McCain) met August 14 with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. CODEL McCain was accompanied by Ambassador Hill, POL M/C Grappo, and PolOff notetaker. President Talabani was joined by Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari.

KRG ELECTIONS AND RELATIONS WITH GOI

¶3. (C) Asked by Sen. McCain about relations between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the government of Iraqi PM Maliki, Talabani replied that he did not think there would be any armed conflict or "war" between the two and expressed surprised that some people seemed to expect such a clash. While acknowledging that there are "differences" between Erbil and Baghdad, Talabani said that, with the help of the United States, outstanding issues such as the status of Kirkuk and the KRG constitution could be solved. He further noted that conflicts within Iraq were hardly confined to Kurdish-Arab relations and cited, as an example, how Sunnis, Turkomen and other groups in Mosul were allying against the Shia. Talabani agreed with Sen. McCain that Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) was responsible for at least some recent terrorist attacks. He claimed that AQI operatives were "surely coming from outside," including Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Syria. "We even have two from Egypt," he remarked.

¶4. (C) Regarding the recent KRG elections and his personal future, Talabani stated that he wished to go back to Kurdistan "if the Kurdistan Alliance (KA) agrees." The future of Iraqi politicians, however, would be determined by the January 2010 national elections. Talabani conceded that the KA and "Islamist forces" had lost parliamentary seats in the KRG elections to the benefit of the Change List, which won 25 seats. He strongly affirmed Sen. Lieberman's

observation that the KRG elections appeared to be genuinely free. While KRG President Barzani had gotten almost 70% of the vote, this was still much less than the 99% approval figure for incumbent leaders seen in rigged elections in other Arab states, he commented. Talabani also confirmed that Barham Salih was currently slated to become the KRG Prime Minister.

A LOOK INSIDE IRAN

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15. (C) Asked by Sen. Collins for his views on Iran, Talabani said the Iranian government and its "religious men" were facing a "serious crisis" that would not be easily solved. The Iranian public, particularly in urban areas, was not satisfied with the results of the elections, he remarked. This dissatisfaction was found among all Iranian ethnic groups, including Kurds, Turkomen, Arabs, and Baluchis, and extended to other subjects. Outside the political realm, Iran faced high inflation and unemployment, and the leadership was disconnected from the younger, media-savvy generation that was born after the 1979 revolution. Talabani opined that Iran likely will be unable to overcome these challenges in the near future, although he declined to predict what might happen next. Conservative Iranians are attempting to go after "so-called reformists" in their frustration, he added.

POSITIVE ON EGYPT, DOWN ON THE SAUDIS

16. (C) Talabani stated that national parliamentary elections,

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currently scheduled for January 2010, would be a defining moment for Iraq. Although it was uncertain whether the major Shia parties will be able to reunite into one electoral coalition, there clearly would be major changes from the 2005 elections as several "new forces" have emerged. Regarding Iraq's external relations, Talabani noted that the GOI had just received an Egyptian delegation; the Egyptian foreign minister might also visit Baghdad. The main problems, he continued, were with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. According to Talabani, Saudi King Abdullah was "sharply against Maliki." Asked by Sen. Graham if Saudi reluctance to engage Iraq was about Maliki or something deeper, Talabani speculated that the Saudis "don't accept democracy in Iraq" and also found it hard to accept that Iraqi Shia were, for the first time, "on top." He further commented that it was very difficult for the Saudis to understand Iraq and that they accordingly overestimated the extent of Iran's influence. On Kuwait, Talabani said that Iraq had made "some offers" to resolve their bilateral dispute over the assets and aircraft of Iraqi Airways, but that nothing had come of this.

ELECTIONS AND RELATED VIOLENCE

17. (C) Returning to elections, FM Zebari declared that the 5-6 months leading up to the January polls would be crucial. According to Zebari, there are important problems which, if not attended to, could become a crisis, especially as U.S. troops withdraw. Violent terrorist attacks had recently increased and were expected to continue, if not escalate, as Iraq approaches the elections. The elections themselves would be a "make or break" event for Iraq in which Iraqis would decide "existential questions" on their country's future, e.g., do Iraqis want a secular or a sectarian religious state? Fortunately, there are signs that Iraqis are moving towards broad, issue-based electoral coalitions that cut across sectarian lines, commented Zebari. Competition between the coalitions will be "fierce," while Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other states would strongly attempt to influence and interfere with Iraq's political process. The United States could help by publicly supporting the

formation of issues-based alliances. "The more you emphasize this, the more this may lessen (sectarian) tensions," he stated.

SYRIAN AND IRANIAN MEDDLING

18. (C) Zebari thanked CENTCOM Commander General Petraeus and the U.S. State Department for helping Iraq improve its relations with key Arab countries. While he did not expect Egypt to open an embassy in Baghdad prior to the January elections, he was confident that it eventually would open. "Egypt will come, as will the UAE, Yemen and others." Expressing concern over the "spreading" of violent attacks in Iraq, Zebari claimed that "most of this is coming from Syria." He accused Damascus of "hosting" suicide bombers and supporting politically motivated attacks within Iraq designed to foment sectarian violence. While Syria sometimes acted cooperatively with Iraq, its "mood" continued to vary. Syria "must change its attitude" towards Iraq, Zebari asserted.

19. (C) Asked by Sen. McCain if Iran was causing more problems for Iraq than Syria, Zebari replied that Tehran had a "different agenda" for its activities in Iraq. Unlike Iran, Syria wanted to undermine the current Iraqi government and restore power to Ba'athists and Arab nationalists. Talabani then interjected that "some people" believe that Damascus and Qthen interjected that "some people" believe that Damascus and Tehran were secretly "united" in their policies regarding Iraq despite apparent differences. Noting that Damascus had asked CODEL McCain to visit Syria on their current trip, Sen. Lieberman inquired why the Syrian government would make such an overture. Talabani responded that the Syrians probably wanted to appear helpful as they often said "the right things." Their actions, however, including their support for Iraqi insurgents, told another story.

110. (C) Talabani opined that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who had a weak grip on power during his first years as president, had significantly strengthened his control of the country by appointing key officials to replace those put into place by his father. The Iraqi President agreed with Sen. Lieberman that despite its current diplomatic offensive, Syria had not changed its ways and was continuing to facilitate the movement of foreign fighters into Iraq. He recounted that al-Asad had once told him that he wanted two things -- the Golan Heights and a stable Iraq. Talabani mused that the latter probably meant an Iraq that was pro-Syria and undemocratic.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

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111. (C) In discussing the transfer of detainees from U.S. to Iraqi custody, Zebari noted that the process was moving forward, but that there were "difficult cases." Sen. McCain shared how an AQI official in U.S. custody had told him that pictures from Abu Ghraib prison had helped his organization recruit "thousands" of individuals. "Hopefully you have learned from this," remarked McCain.

THE MEK "HATED" BY IRAQIS

112. (C) Sen. Lieberman said that some Iranian-Americans were upset about the GOI's treatment of the MEK in Iraq. Talabani asserted that the MEK was "hated" by the Iraqi people since they were supportive of Saddam Hussein and acted as part of Saddam's security forces. The MEK had killed 42 persons in one operation, Talabani alleged, and also had helped crush the attempted Shia revolution in southern Iraq. Although he was sorry about the loss of life at Ashraf, he stressed that it was the MEK who refused to cooperate with the GOI and violently resisted entry into the camp.

¶13. (U) CODEL McCain did not have the opportunity to review and clear this message.

HILL